

Signing the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail—  
How We Can be a Model for Other National Historic Trails — By Steve Burns

For those of you who attended my presentation at the conference in Fort Smith—*Vision to Reality: Developing the National Historic Trail*—you will recall that I made a case for the need to think of the national historic tails and the Trail of Tears specifically, as in the development or building stage. At this stage, I talked about the great need to recognize that for the Trail to change from a “line on the map” to “real on the ground,” a significant amount of visitor infrastructure must be planned (regional National Historic Trail plans) and built. I suggested that we begin to think of the national historic trails, like national scenic trails, as needing to be *built* and that sound and thoughtful regional plans should guide our building efforts. In building and developing the trail, we provide for public visitation and appreciation that will translate into greater support for the trail and preservation of trail resources. In addition, I spoke of signing, as one of the most basic and fundamental parts of a wide array of possible trail infrastructure needs.

Some progress is being made on the signing infrastructure of this “trail building” effort. The National Trails System Office - Santa Fe has been developing some new prototypes as part of developing a family of trail signs that we hope to promote and advocate with our trail partners. For years, signing associated with the Trail of Tears has been somewhat haphazard, with different types and systems of signs being used everywhere, and by different entities. This often presents a confusing, disconnected, and incoherent message to the public about what the Trail of Tears is, where it is, what it’s about, who it is, etc. The beginnings of a sign system were identified in the Comprehensive Management and Use plan for the trail, along with the logo consistent with the national trails system. This, however, is limited in addressing the varied signing needs on the trail and has been applied sporadically, with the logo being the most frequently used part of that system. The logo, however, has often been “asked” to function, due to a lack of alternatives, to provide information and messages to the public in ways beyond the capability of a logo.

As part of the “signing family” within a larger “family” of trail infrastructure needs, the National Trails System Office has been looking at prototypes of site identification signs, as well as other types of trail auto and pedestrian directional and informational signing. Eventually, we hope that visitor infrastructure needs for “building” the trail will form a coherent “kit of parts” along the entire trail. This “kit of parts” will help to form a singular sense of identity, place, and unity for the national historic trail that will allow visitors to truly have a Trail of Tears National Historic Trail experience from one site, interpretive facility, or trail segment, to the next. The prototype signing fits this same model in attempting to create a coherent identity for the national historic trail.



This Sequoyah Birthplace Museum sign is an alternative example for national historic trail site identification.



Another concept study for a national historic trail site identification sign.



A sign concept identifying a certified interpretive facility as a national historic trail visitor center.

Signing the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail— (continued)

Further, what is being developed for the Trail of Tears has implications for national historic trails in general. What is being developed has not been done on any other national historic trail. The parts of the new signing system being developed include:

- site identification signs
- certified interpretive facility signs
- trail site directional signs
- trail crossing signs
- beginning and ending reference signs
- route/detachment identification signs.

Examples of the first two signs being developed in cooperation with certified sites at the Chieftains Museum/Major Ridge Home in Rome, Georgia, Sequoyah Birthplace Museum in Vonore, Tennessee, and newly certified interpretive facility—the Cherokee County Historical Museum in Murphy, North Carolina—are illustrated here.

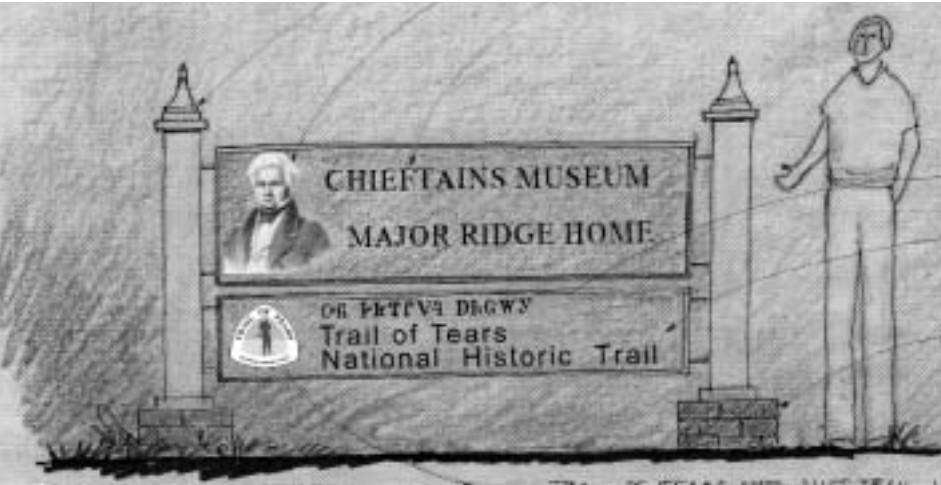
General concepts for the signs are to:

- Promote the use of trail logos in conjunction with the name of the Trail in English and Cherokee.
- Use the trail logo with the NPS sign standard white text on a brown panel originally developed for NPS use as part of the national Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) and now widely used and recognized nationwide by the public for recreational and cultural sites.
- Allow and promote certified sites to retain and convey their own identity, first as part of the national historic trail. The national historic trail sign is therefore generally second and smaller.
- Provide the option for certified sites to have or retain a distinctive site identification sign with the national historic trail sign secondary. Or, to have a more similar, but still primary, white-on-brown panel national style sign that further emphasizes the national importance of the site as part of the national historic trail.

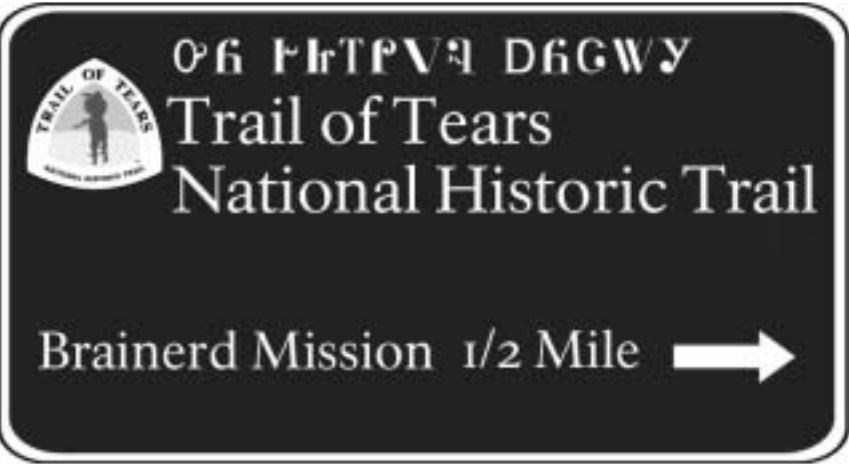
- For sites that are certified interpretive facilities, and therefore may not be a historic property associated with or on

the trail, consider the possibility of signing these as trail visitor centers. This allows the public to know that some level of information and interpretation of the national historic trail is provided here. If you have

any thoughts or comments on the development of the national historic trail signing efforts, please contact Steve Burns with the National Trails System Office - Santa Fe, 505-988-6737, or [steve\\_burns@nps.gov](mailto:steve_burns@nps.gov).



Another national historic trail-site identification sign example.



Example of national historic trail site directional sign.



National historic trail beginning and ending distance reference sign.